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BUSINESS ENGLISH PROJECTS FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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Abstract

Based on the results of a needs analysis carried out among the former students of the Technical University of Budapest a project based Business English course has been designed and implemented by the staff of the English Department. The paper discusses the rationale behind project work as well as the process of practical course design. It also describes a case study – the implementation of a project, which proved to be motivating and rewarding both for the students and the teacher.

Keywords: changing engineering profile, linguistic needs analysis, course design, implementation.

1. Background

The English Department at the Technical University of Budapest is responsible for the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education of over 3000 undergraduate and PhD students each term.

Apart from General English courses, which prepare the students for an exam prerequisite for a degree, a wide range of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses are also offered, such as:

- General Technical English
- Subject Specific courses
- Cross Cultural Studies
- Communication Skills Development
- Business English – being the youngest of the courses.

The question may arise: why do engineers need a Business English course? The answer lies in the changed economic and social conditions in Hungary.

Economic changes have had a radical impact on the labour market for the past few years.

Namely, due to the advance in technology the traditional engineering profile has considerably changed, which means that within a company an engineer is often required to do jobs that need not only engineering but linguistic and interpersonal skills as well.

Engineering graduates will be expected to use English as a 'mediating language' (ROBINSON, 1991) and this may be the first time that our students have realised that English is a bridge between cultures and not being aware of cultural differences can have disasterous effects on business. It also means that stress must be laid on the cross cultural aspects of business life as well raising the students' cultural awareness.

Since the demands towards language teaching have changed there was an urgent need to revise our course policy. That was the reason why we introduced a new Business course for engineering students.

2. Theoretical Considerations

The aim of the course is to enable our students to communicate effectively in business related situations. The necessity for offering a Business course being identified, the next step was to design the course itself.

2.1. Step 1: What?

Each course design is supposed to be based on *the needs analysis of the target population.*

It is not the objective of this paper to examine either the different kinds of needs analysis or the methods how they are carried out but it should be mentioned that a target needs analysis was carried out by the staff of the Department in 1993, which since has been updated. Our objectives were

- to obtain reliable figures of present and future target situation needs with priority ranking of skills and functions
- to get suggestions from our former students of how to improve our EFL teaching (MAUTHNER-FISTER, 1994).

A Questionnaire was designed and sent out to our former students in some 300 institutions, firms national and multinational.

Over a hundred completed and returned forms were processed and analysed from different aspects. The results can be read in an article quoted above and published by CILT in 1994.

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire supplemented with the results of oral interviews a taxonomy of skills and functions was drawn up serving as the core of the syllabus. This taxonomy makes up the menu offered to the students to choose from when deciding on the course content.

However, there is another important field of needs, which must be explored – the perceived needs of the students in the class, which may or may not tally with the real ones.

It is advisable to complement the preliminary questionnaire with informal, on-the-spot class survey, which is done at the beginning of each course. It is also interesting to compare the perceived needs pre-experience students will identify with the real needs of engineers working in all walks of life.

This threefold survey will probably give us a reliable student profile and although it is time consuming, it is also cost-effective – to be business-like – because it saves the teacher and the students from the frustration when a course does not work for no obvious reasons.

Below you will find part of the skills (functions / situations) topics that have been identified and given top priority in the Questionnaire:

2.2. Skills:

Listening: using the phone, giving and getting information on the phone, listening to presentations;

Writing : letters of different nature, papers, reports;

Reading : manuals, technical literature, letters;

Speaking : giving presentations, taking part in meetings, negotiations, small talk.

2.3. Functions:

giving and receiving information, making suggestions, making apologies, etc.

2.4. Situations/Topics:

product presentations, receiving visitors,
meetings, negotiations, travelling abroad, etc.

It is the teacher's responsibility and task to make a cohesive, meaningful entity of the elements listed above in a meaningful, satisfying and rewarding way. Although as DUBIN and OHLSTAIN point it out rightfully in their book 'Course Design' (1986): 'you have to design courses without having been properly trained for this task'.

Now that the WHAT TO TEACH has been identified the HOW TO TEACH is the next stage.

2.5. Step 2: How?

2.5.1. The Learning Process

It is not by chance that the term 'learning process' and not 'teaching process' is used here because it is the student who should be in the focus of the entire process and not the teacher.

When considering the ways of how to process the content of the course again several constraints should be taken into account:

– available time – class size – available materials – learning strategies.

Available time : two hours per week for 13 weeks.

Class size: usually big classes with twenty or more students.

Available materials: the coursebooks on the market do not seem to be fully adequate for our purposes, since they assume more teaching hours than we have, while they are not very motivating either. They would need doctoring and tailoring consequently it is more effective to use them as resource materials. From our point of view resource books focussing on certain aspects of business life are more practical.

Learning strategies : It is uphill work and very frustrating for a teacher to go against the learning strategies of the students. Engineering students are used to empirical, hands-on work experience as in their professional life as well they 'learn by doing'. This is the keyword: the teacher can make the most of their abilities if he/she creates a learning environment in which they feel comfortable. Long-term projects seem to be satisfying in this respect.

Having considered the constraints outlined above and keeping in mind the results of the needs analysis it is time to decide on what type of syllabus will best serve our purposes. The syllabus as Pauline ROBINSON in ESP Today (1991) defines is a 'plan of work' serving as a guideline both for the students and the teacher and showing the route to knowledge.

Having experienced with different approaches a task-based approach proved to be the most effective, challenging as well as rewarding both for the students and for the teacher.

This is nothing revolutionary since in ESP teaching tasks of different nature play a key role – if you think about role-plays, simulations, problem-solving activities, etc., and all the coursebooks use these tasks to make the materials more lifelike. What I felt was not very satisfying about these tasks was that there was not much cohesion between them, on the one hand, and students did not find them very motivating, on the other. Also the aim of each learning process is to acquire as much as possible from the content of the course so I turned to mnemonic techniques. Different kinds of mnemonic techniques show that you will memorise things much easier and much more efficiently if you use association techniques and work on materials of your own. That is, active involvement and association are keywords in remembering things in the long run and long term projects exploit just these

two keywords.

Advantages of project work:

It unites and synthesizes the small steps, microtasks into a new meaningful entity throughout a whole term. It gives us opportunity to exploit the wide range of tasks - role-plays, simulations, case studies all strung like beads around an idea and developed by the students themselves.

Also project work is particularly appropriate for ESP students since doing a project is usually part of their training and it conforms to their learning strategies, this approach will be familiar to them, their imagination, cooperation and inventiveness can be relied on.

The basic structure of a project is like this:

INPUT - PROCESSING /PRODUCING - OUTPUT

2.5.2. INPUT

is provided - by the teacher: both linguistic and content relevant to the objectives of the course.

- by the students: they will provide self-access materials, their own materials, which will be used as input later on.

2.5.3. PROCESSING / DEVELOPING

means both language and content processing. It is done by the students and is monitored, coordinated by the teacher. Here we have a whole detailed inventory of

- skills and subskills : reading- scanning,inferring
- functions : making suggestions, apologies
- notions: space, time
- situations: meetings, receiving visitors
- structures,topics to be covered.

During processing the students are creating new materials, developing materials of their own. While processing the input there is much space for adapting and changing the course . It is very important to have a mid-term evaluation : it gives an opportunity to change the way the course is going and it also gives feedback both to the teacher and the students of how the course is developing.

2.5.4. OUTPUT

The output is usually both oral and written and is assessable all through the course. It is not just one written piece or a single presentation but a

folder full of the students' own materials that they can refer back.

The role of the teacher: In developing a project the teacher's role is different from the traditional teacher centred classroom role: the teacher is rather a partner, a moderator, coordinator of the learning process. The teacher must be flexible enough to be able to provide new materials, promote group interaction, facilitate the constructive classroom atmosphere, help out with grammar and lexis. Teacher control will be less obvious, more remote and subtle. Another important issue here is whether the teacher should know all the intricacies of business. I would say not necessarily. You need not be a trained businessman it is enough to have the attitude of an 'educated layman' Stevens suggests (STEVENS, 1988). We are there not to teach business especially not from an authoritative standpoint but to help them develop their linguistic skills in a workplace environment. It is much better if you concentrate on things that the students probably have not learned in their specialist training. In business you are both novices but it is still advisable to read some specialist literature to have a general idea of what is going on in business. A good way of getting information is to collaborate with colleagues from economics departments who are usually willing to provide you with literature.

Drawing on the experience I have had with project work for the past 4 years I believe that projects possess manifold advantages over other approaches. The most important asset in a project is negotiability, the negotiability of content, process and assessment. All elements of the learning process are negotiable with the students. Students are involved in what they are doing, what they are learning and how they are learning. It also implicitly teaches them an important value : how to come to terms, consensus with each other.

Involvement and motivation are inseparable as involvement in the project content and implementation enhances motivation, while motivation has a positive washback on involvement.

Flexibility and adaptability mean that the project itself is open within one course to changes, alterations, while a flexible enough project can be adapted by many teachers.

Creativity – creative thinking is an innate feature of most engineering students, however, it can be further developed in a project work.

Authenticity – in project work it is not so much the authenticity of the input is important but that of the output. Input materials are usually doctored but output materials are really authentic: the students produce their own materials about an authentic task.

Complexity – students must use all their linguistic and non-linguistic resources including their background information about the content of the course. All these elements are woven into the texture of the project, maybe without the students being aware of it.

Systematic thinking – to think in the framework of a project also develops the students' systematic thinking, planning ahead, seeing options,

alternative routes of action and their possible outcome.

Awareness - both cultural and linguistic are developed through the course. Often this is the first time they have had to confront with the idea of a multicultural world.

Feeling of progress and achievement - during the implementation of the project they sense that they are completing something, heading for an aim and at the end of the project they know they have completed a task and can see the results of their efforts. It is not just seeing the last pages of a coursebook but seeing the results of their own efforts.

Interest in results, evaluation and assessment - when they have finished the project they evaluate the course according to different aspects, also evaluating their participation, activeness. When giving the final presentation they also assess their peer's performance and negotiate it with the teacher. They always pay attention to the other's performance because they know they will also be assessed by their peers. They learn what assessment points to look out for. It gives them feedback of what they have learnt serving as an educational tool. It helps the teacher give assessment of each student complemented with the remarks of the other students. Moreover, evaluation and assessment will have an effect on the fate of future projects.

Hands-on experience may be the most important asset for engineers because it absolutely conforms to their learning strategies.

Last but not least there is a further asset - a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere which promotes the learning process.

To sum up the theoretical considerations behind project based syllabus: A project in my definition reads as a course long authentic, life-like task involving linguistic and non-linguistic elements, which provides enough flexibility both for the students and the tutor.

3. Implementation of the Project : A Case Study A Business English Course for 4th/5th Year Students at the Technical University of Budapest

In this part of the paper it will be discussed how a course was realised.

Students were 4 and 5th year students from different faculties including electrical, mechanical, transport and civil engineers. The first session is crucially decisive for the future of the project, because it creates rapport between the students and the teacher. First there is a short introduction: in pair-work they get to know each other then report back to the class. Then we have a short informal discussion of what they expect of the course. Next they fill in a short questionnaire which I can run through right on the spot to get a general impression of their expectations and see whether they do or don't tally with the preliminarily compiled menu I can offer to them. When they have told me what they want to do in the next few weeks it's my turn

to give them options that I can provide them with. We negotiate first of all the contents of the course from the menu-what they feel we should include in our course, then the how, the framework of the course. If they choose the option of using a single coursebook and going methodically through from cover to cover, then this is the end of project work with that group. But I must say this is very rarely the case. Usually they opt for the project framework which sounds more challenging and promising.

To help them make up their mind I also give them handouts with the detailed project outline so that they could see themselves what project work is about. Project work as I mentioned earlier is not unfamiliar for them because they need to do projects in their strictly taken professional life as well. They are also invited to contribute their ideas, which we will consider. Specimen copies of the previous term's project work are also given to them to whet their appetite.

The whole session is in the form of an informal meeting, a simple decision making process. Sometimes I ask for their permission to record the first session and compare it later with more structured meetings when they have already acquired some meeting skills and discussion techniques. It is also useful to see how much they have progressed since the first meeting is usually some sort of fishmarket howling.

The core of the project is a company of our own.

The students decide what sort of company they want to have:

- product
- company type
- company structure
- company history
- logo
- headquarters, subsidiaries, international relationships
- number of employees
- job descriptions
- job requirements
- human resources policy, etc.

When we have set up the company the daily routine follows – the company needs suppliers of raw material, you need to get in touch with your suppliers on the phone or in written form. Obviously we learn how to use the phone, what kinds of business letters there are, they will ring the partner, write letters to confirm an order, write letters of complaint because of delayed shipments, organise a trip to the partner, receive visitors from foreign partners, take them round the factory, go to exhibitions, prepare a product presentation and decide on which product to produce, consider cost effectiveness, prepare SWOT analysis, attend job interviews, take part in meetings, negotiate deals – all of which could be in the run-of-the-mill of their future positions as the information gained from the preliminary needs analysis has revealed.

Step by step the project develops: sometimes the students will go off the track but with gentle pressure we usually get back to the point.

To develop their own materials I provide the input materials and also ask them to bring authentic materials to class, which we copy and hand out to all participants.

3.1. As for Correction

I always correct their written assignments because it is important for them to see that if you put your name under an assignment it tells about you. During the class I never interrupt a heated discussion or a presentation or a brainstorming session just to correct a mistake that does not get into the way of understanding. Usually I mark the common mistakes and at the end of the session I make comments on them.

3.2. As for Assessment

At the end of the course we usually have a product presentation and a meeting to decide on which product to market.

The assessment is in the form of peer and tutor assessment. They compile a list of parameters which they feel are important in delivering a presentation as content, structure, delivery, etc. and assess each other's performance in the light of these guide-lines. Finally, I also give my assessment and together we try to come to terms in respect of the final mark which as follows from the nature of university courses needs to be awarded.

Next we evaluate the course as such so that I could make amendments for future students. It also gives me feedback on the possible shortcomings of the course: the most frequent complaint is that it's only a one term course, which they feel too short.

4. Conclusions

Drawing on the experience of running project based Business courses now for 4 years I must agree with BLOOR and ST. JOHN (1988) that project activities are directly relevant both to the target and the students perceived needs and they also provide an excellent opportunity for process oriented language learning. Also there is a general consensus in the literature of projects that task based work is enjoyable and actively engages the students both as specialists and as human beings.

Unfortunately so far there has been no systematic evaluation of the results of task based work.

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